

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE SOUTHEAST REGION NEWS RELEASE

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NOAA INCREASES ENFORCEMENT OF FEEDING BAN TO PROTECT WILD DOLPHINS

Public Meeting Planned to Address Issue in Florida

Dolphin feeding by the public in Florida waters is having increasingly serious consequences for both animals and people, so NOAA Fisheries' Office for Law Enforcement is stepping up its efforts to curtail this illegal activity. Increased efforts include stricter enforcement of the laws against the feeding and harassment of marine mammals, increased boater education efforts, and arranging for a town meeting with citizens in the Venice/Nokomis, Fla., area.

NOAA officials are concerned that many people, particularly Florida's tourist community, are unaware that feeding or harassing wild marine mammals is dangerous to animals and humans and is illegal under federal law. NOAA Fisheries is especially concerned about people feeding a dolphin known as Beggar who frequently approaches boaters in the Nokomis, Fla., area to beg for food. More often than not, people have accommodated him. Unfortunately, Beggar has bitten several people who have attempted to feed or otherwise interact with him. Some of the injuries he has inflicted required hospitalization.

"We have been working to solve this problem through education and community oriented policing," said NOAA Fisheries Enforcement Special Agent-in-Charge Eugene Proulx. "However, we've had to increase our enforcement efforts because our concerted education activities have not been an effective deterrent. NOAA's Office of General Counsel recently brought charges against a recreational boater and assessed him with a \$100 fine for allegedly feeding Beggar."

"We understand that people find it tempting to feed and to interact with wild dolphins, and Beggar in particular," said Kathy Wang, a marine mammal biologist in NOAA Fisheries Southeast Office of Protected Resources. "However, people must not feed wild dolphins because, although the food itself may not always harm them, doing so may adversely alter dolphins' behavioral patterns. For example, fed dolphins may be less wary of people making them susceptible to injury from boats."

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(2)

To help focus public attention on the issue of Beggar and the feeding and harassment of wild dolphins, NOAA will hold a town meeting on Tuesday, November 21, from 7 to 9 pm at the Nokomis Community Park, 234 Nippino Trail East in Nokomis, Fla. In the meantime, Proulx urges boaters to ignore and avoid Beggar. "We are committed to protecting people and dolphins so we will continue to issue warnings and violations when necessary. So the next time Beggar comes alongside your boat and looks expectantly for a handout, please let him wander off to find a natural meal elsewhere. It is safer for Beggar, safer for you, and it is the right thing to do," he said.

The federal marine mammal viewing guidelines developed by NOAA Fisheries recommend observing wild dolphins from a safe distance of at least 50 yards and using binoculars or telephoto lenses to get a good view of the animals. Additional information is available through NOAA Fisheries' *Protect Dolphins* Campaign, which includes public service announcements, brochures, posters and warning signs. For more information on the campaign go to:

www.nmfs.noaa.gov/prot_res/MMWatch/MMViewing.html.

NOAA Fisheries urges citizens to report violations of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, during weekly business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Eastern, to its Southeast Region Law Enforcement Division at (727) 570-5344, or after hours and weekends at its National Enforcement Hotline at (800) 853-1964.

This and other Southeast Regional news releases and fishery bulletins are available on the region's Internet home page: <http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov> or NOAA's Internet home page, <http://www.publicaffairs.noaa.gov/releases2000/>.

NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The agency conducts scientific research and provides services and products to support fisheries management, fisheries development, trade, and industry assistance, enforcement, and protected species and habitat conservation programs.

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